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C O N F I D E N T I A L CARACAS 001993

SIPDIS

NSC FOR CBARTON  
USCINCSO ALSO FOR POLAD  
USAID DCHA/OTI FOR RPORTER

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/25/2014  
TAGS: PHUM PGOV KDEM VE  
SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR MEETS WITH SUMATE LEADERS

Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR ABELARDO A. ARIAS FOR REASONS 1.4 (d)  
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SUMMARY  
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¶1. (C) SUMATE leaders Maria Corina Machado and Alejandro Plaz were charged on June 10 and 11 respectively with conspiracy to "destroy the republican form of government" for accepting funds from the National Endowment for Democracy, but have not been detained. Plaz and Machado told the Ambassador and DCM June 8 that they feared they would be charged with treason and conspiracy and jailed when they appeared in court. Plaz asserted that the attempt to shut down SUMATE by arresting Machado and himself would fail as the organization is designed to operate in the face of repression. Machado and Plaz asked the Ambassador's advice on whether to go to jail, go into hiding, or seek asylum. The Ambassador discussed the options but declined to give specific advice on this issue, and talked about the best way the organization could go about informing the international community about their case. End Summary.

¶2. (U) SUMATE leader Maria Corina Machado was charged with conspiracy to destroy the republican form of government by a prosecutor June 10. Alejandro Plaz was similarly charged on June 11. The charges stem from funds the group SUMATE received from the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) for voter education. Charges of treason were not filed against either, despite earlier indications. Neither had been taken into custody as of June 15.

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SUMATE Leaders Expected to be Arrested  
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¶3. (C) The Ambassador, DCM and Poloff (notetaker) met with Machado and Plaz June 8. Plaz reported that the only evidence in the prosecutor's file is the contract with NED, and a public accusation by President Chavez made on television February 15, 2004. Machado and Plaz told the Ambassador that they expected to be charged and perhaps arrested.

¶4. (C) Plaz told the Ambassador that the GOV would fail to shut SUMATE down. He explained that the organization drills for scenarios where offices are seized and leaders arrested. Machado pointed out that the GOV could not arrest 30,000 people. She feared, however, that the case against them would effect operational efficiency, and intimidate people. Machado pointed out that the GOV claim that NED funded treasonous activities in Venezuela implicates the USG as well.

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Ask Ambassador's Advice  
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¶5. (C) Machado told the Ambassador they were considering whether to accept imprisonment, go into hiding, or ask for asylum. Machado and Plaz reported that the situation was placing great strain on their families. Machado asked the Ambassador and DCM for their counsel. Though declining to give specific advice, the Ambassador noted that while going to prison would create an international scandal, the best Venezuelan prison is a nightmare and one could not in good conscience recommend that anyone go to prison. The DCM observed that politically the two would probably be of most value in prison, followed by exile, and then in hiding.

¶6. (C) Asked who he would recommend they talk to in the international community to bring attention to their case, the Ambassador recommended they speak with Amnesty International, the US Congress, and Moises Naim. He further suggested that they try to get in touch with representatives of the GOV's lobbyists in the US, Patton and Boggs, to try to get them to advise the GOV against pursuing the case. The DCM suggested talking to European Union missions.

¶7. (C) In a subsequent conversation the Canadian Ambassador told Ambassador Shapiro that he would gladly recommend both

Plaz and Machado and their families for refugee status in Canada.

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Comment  
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18. (C) The case against SUMATE is purely political, as President Carter observed during the repara process. It is designed to intimidate the most technically effective group in the opposition. SUMATE's talented and dedicated volunteers were critical to the success of the signature drive. If the GOV were able to knock SUMATE out of commission by taking out the leadership, which is unlikely, as Machado and Plaz note, it would be a major blow to the opposition, and the recall effort. Machado and Plaz have handled the case intelligently, denying the courts a pretext to jail them. Machado and Plaz may still be arrested in the future, perhaps closer to the referendum, to confuse the opposition. A strong and immediate international reaction will be necessary to hold the GOV to democratic norms should this occur.

SHAPIRO

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